

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH BILL CARR, DEPUTY UNDERSECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR MILITARY PERSONNEL POLICY SUBJECT: RECRUITING WAIVERS LOCATION: THE PENTAGON, ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA TIME: 9:15 A.M. EDT DATE: FRIDAY, APRIL 25, 2008

Copyright (c) 2008 by Federal News Service, Inc., Ste. 500 1000 Vermont Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20005, USA. Federal News Service is a private firm not affiliated with the federal government. No portion of this transcript may be copied, sold or retransmitted without the written authority of Federal News Service, Inc. Copyright is not claimed as to any part of the original work prepared by a United States government officer or employee as a part of that person's official duties. For information on subscribing to the FNS Internet Service, please visit <http://www.fednews.com> or call (202)347-1400

(Note: Please refer to www.dod.mil for more information.)

CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Like to welcome Mr. Bill Carr, the deputy undersecretary of Defense for Military Personnel Policy, to the Bloggers Roundtable this morning.

Mr. Carr, if you've got an opening statement for us, the floor is yours, sir.

MR. CARR: Okay.

Well, I think, just to put the numbers in context, each year, among the enlistees, we're going to waiver about one in five. Those waivers will be about one-third for medical. Of those one-fifth, one-third will be for medical, and most of the remainder is for conduct.

The vast majority of the conduct waivers are misdemeanors and a litany of three-or-more traffic offenses. And with that, there are some felony arrests and a few felony convictions. Together they total to about a half of one percent of the intake.

In the past year, the Army increased its numbers, almost doubled them. But they are so small that it equates just for scale to fewer than one per congressional district, insofar as felons that were waived in.

The kind of person that we're talking about is someone who doesn't appear to be morally corrupt. Rather it was perhaps a prank gone terribly wrong, a grotesque error in judgment.

But in every case, if their community has joined behind them and said, this is really a good kid, and offered their support, then the recruiter might, if we've got a strong candidate in terms of their other attributes, send it up for a waiver.

A two-star will look at it. And let me say a general officer. I'm not sure if it's always two-star. But a general officer or flag officer will look at it, look at what they read about this person, what their parents, teachers, coaches have to say, and then make a judgment.

But again -- (off mike) -- increase was fewer than one per congressional district. And so we'd all be hard-pressed to even find them if we were out in the field. And if we have done our job, then you would never be able to find them based on their performance or behavior or off-duty habits.

So I'll stop there, and maybe we can pick up from those reference points.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir, thank you very much.

Andrew, you were first on line, so why don't you get us started?

Q Good morning, Mr. Carr. This is Andrew Lubin from The Military Observer. Appreciate you joining us today.

MR. CARR: Hi, Andrew.

Q Sir, so you basically are saying that with the -- for all of hullabaloo in the news the past couple days, we're looking at the -- if you're looking at one per congressional district, you're looking at 435 felons between all the branches of the service?

MR. CARR: I need to check. No, I was talking about the increase there, and the increase was in that magnitude. Let me just double check. The -- we went, from 2006, from about 816 to about 1,077. So about 200 people --

Q Okay.

MR. CARR: -- were added, and that's the reason I drew the inference, sir, the ease of reference that it's an amalgam of -- it takes a lot of counties to even produce one more of these that we would consider.

But our duty is, if we make that judgment, like any other qualification, we're making an estimate that the person has redeemed themselves, is reliable, is not going to be a problem in the unit, and that they have demonstrated that to adults, objective adults who know them in their community and therefore will bring them aboard.

Q But couldn't this be construed that there's a weakening of the standards that -- I mean, a kid has -- a youthful prank gone bad is one thing; a felony conviction is -- that's a pretty serious youthful prank gone bad.

MR. CARR: Yeah.

Q That today's felony waiver gets kind of weakened as time and recruiting -- as recruiting numbers get worse? MR. CARR: I don't -- first, it's not a -- the standard stays the same, and we grant more exceptions. But I would say that the person -- the additional number that were waived in are indistinguishable from the crowd the previous year. There's more of them, but they were felons and arrested for a felony, for the most part, sometimes convicted. And we looked at the felony charge and the press from the community to advocate for the young person and made a judgment.

For example, one of the cases -- it really -- you know, you really want to look close at them because it's unusual behavior, but not -- and then you make a judgment as to whether or not it's so bothersome that I think it's going to create a problem for an employer and certainly this one.

An example is the -- one of them filled a coke bottle with gunpowder and blew up a mailbox in the country. And so that's pretty bad judgment. It certainly is a felony. And depending on the age at which it happened and what his other habits were, we either say together that that person at that moment is beyond redemption forevermore or that we'll look at him, he's going to fight an uphill battle, and we'll see.

But the increase doesn't make the additional people more wicked than last year's. Last year's proved to perform -- I'll say they retained as well as the non-waivered counterparts, and they wouldn't be retaining if they weren't performing. And so they're doing as well as the non-waiver crowd, and therefore we're making correct bets on the risks that we take for someone that has done something that was that much of an aberration against what we expect of our teenagers.

Q Okay, thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Grim.

Q I'm sure we all know people who were admitted on a waiver of this sort and turned out to be fine soldiers and Marines and probably were better for being admitted, so I'm not hostile to the program. But I would like to hear more about any efforts you make to track these folks once they're in the service to make sure that the program does, in fact, work and these people are, in fact, not causing problems in the service at a higher rate than regular enlistees.

MR. CARR: You know, there's not one in DOD now, but we recognized last year with -- at the DOD level. Now, I'm not sure about the service level. I did see service reports that told me they were tracking because they were aware of what their retention behavior was, for example. So there are service tracking -- they've mentioned research organizations that they hire to track it.

But I think your question of me is, do we have a systematic tracking of these at the DOD level? And to this point, we don't. But we recognized last year that we've got to be sure there's a uniform and systematic tracking so that we can take the large chunks of descriptions of success in the waiver program and be doubly sure that we're systematically tracking it, apples to apples.

Q Yeah, I agree, because then the argument is not, we're admitting people because we have to, but rather because we can say, are they in fact hurting the Army or in fact we're helping the population by taking people and giving them great discipline.

MR. CARR: Exactly. There is a feedback loop, though.

If we -- let's take a medical waiver. That's a little less incendiary. But whether it's behavior or conduct or it's medical, the training base, when they get a bad actor, are quick to point it out. And if it were creating a problem, my knowledge of the institution tells me that the training base isn't going to put up with it and that practice in recruiting is going to change and we would have heard about.

So I think it is, as reported, that the general officer is making the call and they are coming in and there wasn't a personality disorder or some kind

of antisocial behavior embedded. There was instead an action that sure makes you suspicious; but on close inspection, running them against all the reviews and all the people that they have to go get and sign forms that say that they're good citizens, it's a pretty good check and a pretty safe bet.

And it's -- in a way, I don't -- I can't carry it over to a medical waiver, but even those are based on do we think that this, which is typically a problem in any population, in this case has conditions that mitigate in favor of success, and I don't think this particular medical problem is going to be limiting for this person.

Q Well, I'm glad to hear you're developing a more systematic way of checking up just to make certain that the theory plays out.

MR. CARR: Yes, sir.

Q Andrew, do you have anything else? Or is there someone else on the line? I --

MR. HOLT: Yes. Bryant?

Q Oh, sorry.

Q Thank you very much. Bryant Jordan from military.com. The issue on the waivers has been getting obviously a lot of play lately, but in the last five years or so also, the Army has done something else which sort of made me wonder what was going on. And that is, they started -- (inaudible) -- with tattoos in the hands and the neck. Now, this is something that the Army never has done previously, but if they did not do that and if they did not now allow these growing numbers of waivers, would the Army be able to make its recruiting goals each year? MR. CARR: Well, actually, the -- on the -- I think on the tattoos, it would be close. For every time that you do bring in a person at the margin, it's one less person that you would have to bring in that's not at the margin. And while I'll concede that, the issue is, are those marginal decisions safe and effective? And I think they are.

Now, let me demonstrate that with respect to tattoos. You're correct about the Army in terms of would the tattoos show.

And you begin limiting your market based on the kind of body art that a particular generation would apply to themselves.

But there was a change that the Army made that would say that they're tightening up there. For a number of years, it had been an Army view that the presence of a tattoo from a group that might -- not a hate group. You may not come in with a tattoo for a hate group. That's disqualifying. But in the event that there were some things that might represent a propensity to misbehave, but there was no misbehavior manifest, then there had been a view of some -- many Army attorneys that you had to have that misbehavior. Now the Army, like the Navy, and now all the services, have all gone to the same tight standard. And that is, you show me a tattoo, I'm going to check it against a book of gangs, and in the event that you have one, you almost certainly are going to be disqualified.

Again, heretofore gang affiliation was not in itself a disqualification in the Army. It had been in other services. And now uniformly, and the Army

has joined that, gang affiliations are disqualifying. But again, remember, hate groups had always been disqualifying.

Q When did the gang affiliations become a disqualifier? I'm sorry, this is Mark -- (name inaudible).

MR. CARR: The gang, that was in the past year, but I don't remember the exact date.

Q Thanks.

Q I've got a follow-up.

MR. HOLT: Okay, go ahead.

Q Mr. Carr, Andrew Lubin again. Sir, could you break down -- or let me ask you a more general question here. Why does the Army have to relax standards when the Marine Corps does not? They're still meeting their numbers and going above and aboard. And they got a far more stringent tattoo policy, far more stringent review policy on felons. They don't have -- what's the issue here?

MR. CARR: Well, I think the key is delivering a vibrant military for the nation. Now, let's compare Army and Marine Corps recruiting. They both face challenges. The Army faces more acute challenges. How do I say that? If we look at the investment per recruit, the Air Force and the Marine Corps are roughly half the investment per recruit required to generate a quality recruit than is the Army. And so it is at least a consideration of the availability, and that manifests itself because it's -- if we keep this in context, this is minor numbers. But there are other quality indicators too where the Army is somewhat less than the Marine Corps; for example, high school diplomat graduates, a traditional high school diploma.

So there is a case where, in relatively large numbers, the Army has elected to go with people holding alternate credentials, when the Marine Corps would stay with a traditional high school diploma.

Q But that's the issue. You're dumbing down -- why are you dumbing down the Army?

MR. CARR: Okay, you've used the word "dumbing down." High school diploma doesn't have to do with dumb. The aptitude test scores have to do with dumb, and the Army has not missed its objectives there.

So a high school diploma simply serves one purpose, and that is a predictor of stick-to-itiveness, or more specifically, how many of them are going to make it to three years. About 80 percent of a traditional high school grad population is going to make it to three, 50 percent of the non-grads. So you're better off going with the grads.

Army is going with fewer grads, but Army is also, in that context, reducing attrition in the training base and they're able to take more non-grads because of a test, which RAND Corporation has confirmed works, that allows you to go into the GED crowd and find the false negatives. In other words, a GED would not be an appealing enlistment relative to a traditional diploma. And so the Army, though, by administering some additional evaluations and lifestyle-

type questions that cannot be gained are able to find those GEDs who do have stick-to-itiveness and therefore they can take more of them without hiking risk.

So when we mention dumb, the high school diploma, whether it's a GED or whatever, we've never viewed that as having to do with smarts or dumbs. We do, however, look -- and if there were a single most important criterion, in my view, for military performance, it would be aptitude scores. We draw two-thirds from the top half of America, far more than our share of people with high aptitude and we can call them smarts. And they're the ones who can figure out ambiguous situations, and that's what we see on TV.

So again quality job one, I would assert, is aptitude: very expensive commodity. They're in high demand by every employer. They're more propense to go to college. But that's where the military puts principal focus.

And again two-thirds we're recruiting from the top half. It would be a lot easier, to recruit from the bottom half, and a lot cheaper. And it would produce a lot more numbers. But we're not. That is job one.

High school diploma: Yeah, our rule says you ought to have 90 percent. But like any rule, if you can tell me that you can go into the forbidden group and find people that behave identical with the others, then more power to you. That's a cost-effective proposition for America.

(Cross talk.)

MR. CARR: Hi, Mark.

Q Hi.

I guess one of the things, that I try and look at in all this, is trying to get a sense of sort of the again absolute numbers.

MR. CARR: Right.

Q You know, and I think that, you know, to the extent that we're talking about, what, 1,077 aggregate waivers, over a total recruiting base last year of how many?

MR. CARR: 180-grand or so.

Q Okay.

So we're talking about --

MR. CARR: The DOD number, and I gave you sort of a DOD recruiting number.

Q Right.

So we're talking about something on the order of, you know, six- tenths of a percent. MR. CARR: Yes.

Q And so clearly you know, I mean, one of the questions that I had, and I'm real pleased, that you're doing this, and appreciate it.

When I read the stories, it was, okay, what's the real impact on recruiting numbers, i.e., is it 15 percent of the kids? You know, in which case, it's one thing; if it's half percent, another.

And then you did say that the service, the Army, has tracking to show retention: through, what, basic advanced infantry school or through the full three years?

MR. CARR: It'll be through the full three years, I believe. But I don't know if it's systematic tracking or it was data series that were created by the contractors and research centers that were doing it. I'm sorry, I don't know that.

But there is a population that was gathered and tracked of, I'm sure, substantial number, because lead research outfits were cited.

And so in any event, there is a data set for a meaningful cohort, but I'm not sure how wide it -- how wide that cohort was.

Q Okay. I mean, that just gives me a box around the issue.

MR. CARR: By the way, I -- one thing that may help this. The reason that I think felons and so forth is important, it certainly is sensational, but it really also says to America, "Boy, are they cutting corners." If we were cutting corners, we would be able to do it on a very large scale, instantly, by bringing in average aptitude, because you know that if you're talking high aptitude, high math and verbal scores, correlates, has concordance tables with the SAT, that you're talking about people who are off to a great start and have a lot of options. We insist that the services, every one of them, ever year, draw 60 percent -- six-zero -- from the top half, and most of them are exceeding it. Army's just about exactly at 60 percent.

But if we were going to cut corners in a way that no one would really take note of, then that's probably where we would do it. But we don't, because our goal is high-performing military, and we will consider a person with a conduct arrest or conviction if they bring moral rectitude as attested to by their community, and a lot of other talents. And that's what produces a high-performing military. So if we were cutting corners just to sort of dumb down, then you can bet we would have already cut corners there.

But that's job one, in my view, and I think it's a corporate view, that if there was one qualitative attribute we better deliver if we're going to get high performance out of this military, then it's aptitude levels. And they're expensive to recruit.

Q Can I follow up, guys, or you've got more?

Q Bryant Jordan here.

MR. HOLT: Yes, go ahead.

Q Yeah, I'm curious. Is there a -- is there a point at which DOD will not go in terms of issuing numbers of waivers or percentage of waivers? Or can we look, you know, five or 10 years down the road, when they're into this long war, that we'll just -- as the usual pool gets smaller, the DOD will continue to just increase the number of waivers of people? MR. CARR: Well, I

think that waivers, again, are people accepted at the margin, and that -- are they safe bets? Yes. The answer is yes, they are.

Now, in the event that the economy, the employment situation were to change -- remember it's been enormously high employment, less than 5 percent unemployment -- that that is what makes you reach deeper in the military or any employer in order to compete for the young people that are available and willing. And so if the employment situation were to change, then yes, that would -- if the resources remain constant, and they probably would, then you would expect to see fewer marginal choices when you're in very good times of enlistment supply.

But even though we're in the probably most difficult time for enlistment supply, mainly because of the economy but also because of the war and mothers' fear about the welfare of their children, that even in those most hostile times, we are not relaxing at all getting way better than American youth in terms of that key, expensive, elusive determinant of performance called aptitude.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Q Can I go?

MR. HOLT: Yes. Go ahead.

Q Okay. It's Andrew Lubin again.

MR. CARR: Hi, Andrew.

Q But it seems -- again, I'm kind of listening to everything. The Army's dropped standards. You're barely making numbers. And you're paying twice to get recruits what the Marine Corps and the Air Force pays. Is there maybe -- and the other services aren't having problems with the numbers, and they sort of got the same war, the same economy, same job market. Is there a problem with the army -- with the message the army's putting out, then?

MR. CARR: No. I think that it is the -- the Army is achieving the recruiting mission numerically and with solid quality. And again, I'd emphasize, because of drawing far more than their share in smart people, which is a very expensive strategy, that the Army has stayed with that strategy.

And where we've talked about adjusting is things like bringing in a few people over 40 and a very few additional felons and suggested that that leads to an Army that is at risk. But again, with coming up on two-thirds of their force 60 percent top-half aptitude, it's a pretty powerful Army and a pretty powerful number of youth relative to the average American young person.

And I think, you know, the stories are often presented in a way that would -- couldn't help but lead the reader to believe that it's kind of a crude, crummy, who wants to be there Army, and yet when you ask those that are in it, they say it's not that way at all. Why? Because the sensational, although small in number, gain prominence, and unfortunately lead to a misimpression.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Well, Mr. Carr, we're just about out of time here. Do you have any final thoughts, final words for us?

MR. CARR: Well, I think the key would be only to represent the military to the stakeholders and the stockholders for what it is and what it's done with their precious investments. And as a group of young people, if you took -- if we had the average recruit, it's a person who is better educated -- in terms of completing a high school diploma -- than average. Only 75 percent of American youth have a traditional diploma.

They're better educated, they're higher aptitude, and to the extent they have some dings, either in conduct or in medical areas, those are carefully explored and determined to be safe.

And they're all people that other people like to be around, and that's a strong determinant of the recordbreaking retention we've had in recent years.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much. We appreciate you joining us here today on the Bloggers Roundtable. And perhaps we can speak to you again. Mr. Bill Carr, the deputy undersecretary of Defense for Military Personnel Policy, with us today.

Thank you, sir. And I hope we have -- hope that we can speak again.

MR. CARR: Okay, sounds great. Look forward to it. Q Thank you guys for setting this up.

Q Thank you, sir.

Q Thanks, Jack.

END.